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Next likely Soviet signal in East-West ties: chemical weapon talks

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The next Soviet signal in East-West relations could come at the Geneva talks on banning chemical weapons. Or it could come in bilateral superpower relations.

It is unlikely to materialize at the Vienna troop reduction talks, however.

This seems to be the consensus of a number of allied diplomats close to the ongoing American, British, and West German attempt to work out a common modification of the NATO proposal of 1982. Such a modification could not be wrestled out in time for the March 16 reopening of the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) talks.

The sources believe that Western differences can be resolved in the next few weeks — with West Germany scaling down its wish for a public demonstration of the West's readiness to compromise, and with the United States and Britain trimming their aversion to good-will gestures before end goals have been agreed on. The diplomats do not really expect, however, that any of the modified Western approaches now under consideration would elicit a major Soviet response.

The decade-old MBFR talks have in any case always been somewhat peripheral to the main superpower concerns of nuclear balance and détente. Moscow's sudden willingness last January to resume the Vienna talks was an exception; it was important as the first step back from Soviet suspension of nuclear and conventional arms control negotiations in late 1983 in reaction to NATO's new deployment of Euromissiles.

The subsequent death of Soviet party secretary Yuri Andropov and the succession of Konstantin Chernenko created a new opportunity for East-West, signaling a changed situation. But by then some direct political dialogue between the superpowers had been restarted and the Geneva talks on banning chemical weapons looked more promising as a medium for East-West communication. The MBFR talks were no longer needed as a surrogate for the nonexistent nuclear talks and a reassurance for public opinion.

Chemical weapons talks continue to be attractive to the Soviets partly because of their political ambiguity. The Soviet initiative tabled this year conveys a message of reasonableness to the West. At the same time, however, it holds the potential of arousing anti-military passions in the future among West Germans in the same way that nuclear weapons issues did last year. It also could head off imminent American upgrading of chemical capability as the US reacts to the extensive Soviet chemical capability in Europe.

Chemical arms control — which is simpler than nuclear arms control or probably even European troops reductions — also holds out the possibility of an eventual high-level superpower meeting if enough progress is made.

The broader resumption of the superpower dialogue — along with President Reagan's conciliatory speech of Jan. 16 and Chernenko's toning down of Soviet anti-American rhetoric — provides another major channel for private and public East-West communication.

The already slim Soviet incentive for a summit prior to the US presidential election (if Reagan looked like a shoo-in) is fading as the November election begins to look somewhat more open. But any post-election summit, if desired, could be arranged directly at this point without requiring prior signaling in other form.

All this suggests that the MBFR talks will revert to their more limited technical function of trying to stabilize troop confrontations in Central Europe, without bearing any additional symbolic burden.

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